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PANAMA: General Torrijos to keep canal issue quiet
during US election campaign. [redacted] (Page 6)

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PANAMA: GENERAL TORRIJOS HAS INDICATED THAT HE INTENDS TO KEEP THE CANAL ISSUE QUIET DURING THE US ELECTION PERIOD.

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TORRIJOS HAS REAFFIRMED TO THE US AMBASSADOR THE LINE TAKEN EARLIER BY FOREIGN MINISTER TACK THAT PANAMA WOULD MAKE EVERY EFFORT TO KEEP THE SITUATION CALM UNTIL AFTER THE US ELECTION, AND INDEED UNTIL THE END OF THE YEAR. THE US AMBASSADOR, FOR HIS PART, OFFERED ASSURANCES THAT THE US IS IN NO WAY INVOLVED IN ANY PLOT BY PANAMANIAN EXILES TO OVERTHROW TORRIJOS.

TORRIJOS HAS BEEN PREOCCUPIED WITH DOMESTIC MATTERS AND APPARENTLY DOES NOT WISH TO MOVE HIS GOVERNMENT ON A COLLISION COURSE WITH THE US AT A TIME WHEN HE IS PREPARING TO CLOAK HIS RULE IN CONSTITUTIONAL GARB. HE SEEMS TO HAVE DECIDED AGAINST HAVING THE PANAMANIAN DELEGATION GIVE A MAJOR ADDRESS ON THE CANAL ISSUE BEFORE THE OPENING SESSIONS OF THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY. IN ANOTHER GESTURE OF GOODWILL LAST WEEK, WHEN HE LEARNED THAT HIS UNDERLINGS HAD INVITED A NORTH VIETNAMESE DELEGATION TO SPEAK AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PANAMA, HE PROMISED TO DRAW A CURTAIN OF SILENCE AROUND THE EVENT BY FORBIDDING PRESS COVERAGE.

ALTHOUGH HIS CURRENT ASSURANCES APPEAR SINCERE, TORRIJOS HAS NEVER BEEN RELUCTANT TO CHANGE HIS POSITION. MOREOVER, HIS COMMITMENT TO "FRIENDLY RELATIONS" SEEMS TEMPERED BY A BELIEF THAT THE ATTAINMENT OF A SUFFICIENTLY FAVORABLE CANAL TREATY WILL ULTIMATELY REQUIRE THE USE OF PRESSURE TACTICS.

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PANAMA HAS BEEN ATTEMPTING TO LINE UP SUPPORT IN THE UN FOR ITS POSITION IN THE CANAL NEGOTIATIONS IN PREPARATION FOR A POSSIBLE APPEAL TO THE WORLD BODY SOMETIME NEXT YEAR. IT IS ALSO TRYING TO SELL THE IDEA THAT THE SECURITY COUNCIL, ON WHICH IT NOW OCCUPIES A TEMPORARY SEAT, SHOULD MEET IN PANAMA CITY DURING THIS SESSION. THUS IF DOMESTIC PRESSURES DEVELOPED OR TORRIJOS BECAME ANGERED BY US ACTIONS, FOR EXAMPLE, ON NARCOTICS, TORRIJOS MIGHT FEEL LITTLE COMPUNCTION ABOUT UNLEASHING HIS PUBLICISTS THIS YEAR RATHER THAN NEXT.

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